



# The Tree of Life

Rated PG-13. Our Ratings: V-3; L -2 ; S/N -2. Running time: 2 hour 18 min.

“Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding, Who determined its measurements—surely you know! Or who stretched the line upon it? On what were its bases sunk, or who laid its cornerstones when the morning stars sang together and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy? Job 38:4-7

... for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. Matthew 5:45b

It is a bit amazing that Terence Malick’s new film is being released during the season known as that of the summer blockbuster. None of the films that he has “written, produced, and directed” since his first in 1973, *Badlands*, ever achieved the enormous profits of one of the summer action/super hero movies that audiences love to escape into. *Badlands*, the story of a couple of young lovers murdering their way from a small South Dakota town to the badlands of Montana, followed the traditional narrative arc, but since then Mr. Malick’s style has evolved into an impressionistic one, the writer/director in *Tree of Life* almost abandoning a narrative structure for a series of seemingly random shots of the life of a small town family that invites viewers to connect with their own memories of family life—and of the larger context of the cosmos that surrounds us. This is not an easy film to watch, Mr. Malick making no concessions to the viewer, but it is immensely rewarding for those willing to go along with the director. He takes us on the most exciting visual ride since Stanley Kubrick’s 2001: *Space Odyssey*. Indeed, for people of faith, this is a far more exhilarating trip than 2001, thanks to Mr. Malick’s deep interest in matters of the spirit, one that was so manifest in his wonderful war film *The Thin Red Line*. The film opens with a dark screen on which is printed a passage from the Book of Job, and then we watch a series of shots of a mother and father enjoying their three young boys. The time is the 1950s, and the place is a small town in Texas. Then, apparently much later, Mrs. O’Brien (Jessica Chastain) receives a telegram. We do not see the text, nor is there any dialogue, but we can tell by her reaction that it must be about the death of one of their sons. Mr. O’Brien (Brad Pitt) receives the sad news at the town’s small airport. Because of the prop noise from a plane we cannot hear his words. The couple is wracked with grief. We do not see the funeral service, just the church’s stained glass window, a wonderfully spiral-shaped one. We see hands, children’s shadows, and we hear the snatches of the conversations of the would be comforters—“Nothing ever stays the same... You still have your two others... The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away.” Mr. O’Brien chokingly remarks that there’s no reason for this. Up to this point the film reminded me a little of *Rabbit Hole*, stylishly very different, but also about parents grieving over the loss of a son. But then comes a lengthy segment that immediately recalls to mind the passage from Job quoted at the beginning of the film (the film’s title doesn’t come on until the end), “Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding... when the morning stars sang together and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy?” (Job 38:4,7) These were words spoken by God to a man who was not only filled with grief, but also protesting the unfairness of what had happened to him. We are in the land of calamity unfairly befalling the innocent, explored in a very different vein by the Coen brothers in their *A Serious Man*. The flame-like image that the film began with introduces this new sequence, taking us on a ride through the history of the universe, thanks to the fine special effects work of 2001’s Douglas Trumbull. The big bang. Stars, nebulas, and galaxies. Suns and planets. The watery earth and erupting volcanoes. The beginning of microscopic life. Plants and mountains. Fish (lots of hammerhead sharks in one shot) and other sea creatures. A small dinosaur hops through the forest and along a river. It stops when it sees a

fallen dinosaur. It places its foot upon the creature's head. We expect to hear a crack or squishing sound, but it lifts its foot off and moves on. Could this be the beginning of compassion, even at this early stage in the evolution of life? Then comes a cataclysm that even the mighty dinosaurs cannot survive. The rest of the film seems to be from older son Jack O'Brien's (Sean Penn) point of view. He is a successful architect working in a Houston high-rise as he reflects back on his family and raises questions concerning his troubled relationship with his father. There unfolds a marvelous series of images of growing up with two brothers and a harsh father and gentle mother. We never hear the first names of the parents. This is in keeping with Jack's point of view—no child in the 1950s would have called parents by their first names. Mrs. O'Brien says that there are "two ways through life: the way of nature, and the way of grace." The father embraces the way of nature, or what the apostle Paul would call the way of law. In one scene Father takes little Jack to the edge of their property and orders him to see the line where their neighbor's yard begins. He is not to cross it. This is but the beginning of the boundaries that the strict father sets for his offspring. Mr. O'Brien often berates his son's, especially Jack, for their shoddy yard work, and when a son resists him at the table, Mr. O'Brien loses his temper and manhandles the boy, ejecting him from the room. Mrs. O'Brien and Jack look on in disapproval. In another scene Mr. O'Brien struggles with Jack himself. Jack's resentment turns into a brief period of hatred that causes him to wish his father to die—and in the scene in which he comes upon his father working beneath the family car, we fear that he will give in to the clear temptation to kick over the jack holding up the car. Mrs. O'Brien is grace embodied, quickly forgiving the boys' peccadilloes (Jack and some friends throw rocks through the window of a vacant house). She plays with the boys and often dances around the house or yard with them. She is a wonderful incarnation of verse 7 of the passage from Job, "when the morning stars sang together and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy." We hear her tell her sons, "That's where God lives," as the camera pans up to the sky. The family is devoutly Christian, attending church and saying grace at family meals. At one point we hear a portion of their priest's sermon in which he is preaching on Job and reminding the congregation, "misfortune befalls the good as well." Mr. O'Brien plays the church organ as young Jack looks on. Apparently the father's great regret is that he failed to pursue his passion for music professionally, settling instead for a secure job at the local power plant. Harsh as he is at times, Mr. O'Brien deeply loves Jack and his brothers, embracing them often, and when Jack is retiring for the night, asking him for a kiss. Dozens of other scenes evoke the tenderness, wonder, and joy of family life—shots of an infant Jack putting his ear up to his mother's swollen belly to hear movements of one of his brothers. Mr. O'Brien holding the tiny foot of a newborn son in his man's hand. A baptism at church. The brothers crawling, learning to walk, looking at the wonders of nature—in a shot that Malick had not planned, Mother watches joyfully as a butterfly lands on her out-stretched hand. The boys chasing after bubbles floating across their lawn. Jack planting a tree with his father. Mother tucking in the boys at night and looking in on them. The boys learning about death and injury through the drowning of a boy at the public swimming pool and the burning of the head of another lad in a house fire. Running through fields, climbing trees—all the mundane things we take for granted, Mr. Malick prods us to regard with a renewed sense of wonder, joy, and thanksgiving. There is more, much more, to be said about this great film in which cinematographer Emmanuel Lubezki, guided by the director and enhanced by the no-less than five editors, reveals so much beauty, of both of nature and that of the human spirit. The latter is fallen, as many scenes show, but it is capable of redemption—later Mr. O'Brien seeks Jack's forgiveness as he realizes that he had chosen the wrong approach to life. Earlier Jack himself had experienced forgiveness and reconciliation after he had deliberately shot one of his brothers with his BB gun. The film's climax is a cinematic version of a cosmic reconciliation, some perhaps regarding it as an apocalyptic version of heaven. Whether or not Mr. Malick's beliefs conform to orthodox Christianity, he is clearly fascinated with the big questions of life, death, faith, and reconciliation. By setting his loose story of the O'Brien family amidst the splendors of the history of the universe he has given us a film that will resonate within the heart and soul of those in the audience willing to open up to his unusual approach to filmmaking. Not everyone will be able to do so. Following the private screening I attended, one reviewer went into a rant about how terribly chaotic and incomprehensible the film was, a reaction that many others will also feel. For those with "eyes that see and ears that hear," and are willing to work hard

to do so, this will be a film to treasure and return to time after time. Because it is a difficult film I strongly urge you to see it in company with one or more friends so that afterwards you can help each other “to see.” Do not be like Mr. O’Brien who admits to his son that he missed “the glory.”

For Reflection/Discussion

1. How did you feel at the end of the film? Confused? Frustrated? Exhilarated? What one word might sum up this film experience for you?
2. What do you see as Mr. Malick’s worldview? Is the universe benevolent or not for him? What scenes/images support your understanding of this? Do you think that his trip through the history of the cosmos is scientific or poetic—or a combination?
3. How can we see the opening sequence as a prelude of a musical work, and the rest of the film as a series of symphonic movements? How does the music (Berlioz, Brahms, Bach, Mozart) reinforce or underscore the various scenes?
4. Did you miss the abundant dialogue found in most movies? How is this an almost purely cinematic film, Mr. Malick showing, rather than telling us? Some have said that his portrayal of the O’Briens is very impersonal: what do you think?
5. Describe the two parents and their approach to life. Note how the scenes in which each parent wakes up the boys shows their contrast. Mother playfully puts some ice cubes into her son’s pajamas; Father yanks off their covers. What does it mean that one approaches life through grace and the other through nature or law?
6. How is Mr. O’Brien at war with himself in the way in which he relates to his sons? Especially to Jack?
7. How does Jack’s past shape and stay with him? What scenes/shots revived memories of your childhood, or of your own parenting? Are their things you would change if you could? What do you think of Mr. O’Brien’s attempt to prepare his son for survival in a tough world? If you have seen *The Great Santini*, compare him to Bull Meechum.
8. What do we see of Mr. O’Brien’s failures? (His confession to Jack that he did not follow his musical dreams, coupled with his admonition for Jack to stay with his. His court battles for rights to his unspecified invention. The loss of his job.) How might all of these have contributed to Mr. O’Brien apparent “metanoia” when at last he tells Jack, “I dishonored it all. Didn’t notice the glory”? Do you feel at times that you have not noticed “the glory”? Do you feel many others also miss out on it?
9. There is a brief baptismal scene: what other suggestions of baptism and birth do we see in the film? Of grace and reconciliation (as well as of sin)?
10. What do you make of the flame-like image that begins the film and which introduces new segments? What other shots and images stand out? How does the shape of the stained glass window remind you of the spiral galaxies in the history of the cosmos section?
11. The portion of the sermon that we hear contains such phrases as “we vanish as a cloud...Is there nothing that does not pass away?... We cannot stay as we are...” What visual does the filmmaker focus on during part of this? (If you remember the image of the stained glass figure of Christ, pat yourself on the back.)
12. Of his previous four films (*Badlands*, *Days of Heaven*, *The Thin Red Line*, and *The New World* to which does this seem most similar? (Remember the one based on James Jones’ novel begins with a crocodile (Leviathan in the Scriptures) and the voice of Pvt. Witt asking from where does evil emanate?)
13. As with Pvt. Witt, we hear Jack ask many questions: “When did you speak to me first?” “What was it you were showing me? ... Always you were calling me.” Whom is he addressing? How is he like his father in that he undergoes a spiritual epiphany?
14. How does filmmaker help us, in Mr. O’Brien’s words, “to notice [see] the glory”? If you have seen the film *American Beauty*, note the scene in which an ordinary plastic bag dancing in the wind leads Ricky to see a benevolent power in the universe.)
15. Does either the Bible or Malick’s film provide answers to our questions as to the why of innocent suffering? What do you think about this?
16. For those discussing the film with a group, you might close with my favorite words of Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s from her poem “Aurora Leigh”: “Earth’s crammed with heaven, And every common bush afire with God. And only he who sees takes off his shoes, The rest sit around and pluck blackberries.”